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SEMIOTICS OF DRINK AND DRINKING

PAUL MANNING

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The Semiotics of Drink and Drinking

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

It was a commonplace of Renaissance humanism that drinking and eating can both illustrate the opposition between signs and the material world, and also mediate these opposites:

> We live in a divided world, a world in which physical and mental pleasures are compartmentalized and ordered into a hierarchy: they either conflict with each other or are mutually exclusive. . . . We have to choose whether to speak or to eat: we must not speak with our mouth full. However the banquet is the one thing that overcomes this division and allows for the reconciliation of opposites. It recognizes physical laws, reinstates the legitimate role of instinctive behaviour, but at the same time provides a place for conversation and a setting for good manners. (Jeanneret 1991: 1–2)

As the Renaissance humanists realized, the contradictory relationship between speaking and drinking makes it an excellent arena to study the relationship between meaning and materiality in general, to construct a materialist semiotics.[1] Nowhere else is the conflict and coincidence of the semiotic and the material orders better displayed than in the duality of function of the human mouth, an orifice divided between what is distinctively human, the semiotic order of articulate speech, and what we generically share with other animals, the material order of eating and drinking. As Charles Darwin observed in his *On the Origin of Species* (1859: 191), the evolutionary price humans pay for using the mouth and throat for the unnatural purpose of speech is high: we are the only animal that can easily choke to death while eating. For Renaissance humanists, as Jeanneret argues, this apparent duality of the semiotic and material, spirit and matter, displayed in the duality of function of the human mouth, underlines the way that human nature is a combination of these two orders:

> The mouth as an organ of both eating and speaking serves to illustrate this thesis. Ingestion and expression, care for the body and manifestation

> of the spirit, all take place through the mouth, a symbol of the close links between these functions. In his treatise on tongues, Erasmus stresses this duality: the same organ serves to 'take in food and drink, to emit sound and to articulate speech'. . . . Such a contiguous relationship emphasizes the physical dimension of utterance: speaking while one eats, one becomes aware that words are material substance and physiological phenomena. (Jeanneret 1991: 33)

Part of the specificity of the semiotics of food and drink, then, is that eating and drinking represent at first glance the material antithesis of the purely semiotic order of speech. However, the mediation of the mouth overcomes this opposition, showing us that while eating and drinking are semiotic phenomena, speaking is also a material one. The relationship between speaking and drinking is also a mutually constituting *reflexive* one: a drink can only become a 'toast' through the regimenting metasemiotic effect of words, but the performative effect promised by those words only becomes fulfilled when the toast is actually drunk.

This brings me to the second point about how drinks and drinking are 'special' in both semiotic and material terms. Drinks, as Michael Dietler argues, differ from other kinds of material culture in that they represent 'embodied material culture':

> [A] special kind of material culture created specifically to be destroyed, but destroyed through the transformative process of ingestion into the human body. Hence, it has an unusually close relationship to the person and to both the inculcation and the symbolization of concepts of identity and difference in the construction of the self. (2006: 232)

So part of the meaning of drinks is based on their specific material relationship to human embodiment: they are *drinks*, so their meaning is completed only by their teleological association with *drinking*. The fact that the meaning of drinks achieve their completion only by being incorporated within the human body materially is an integral part of their potentials for meaning.

However, all these things specific to the semiotics of drinks and drinking are shared with food and eating. The question arises as to whether there is anything specific to the semiotics of drink that differentiates it from the semiotics of food? I do not want to make too strong an argument here for the differences, because, after all, drinking as often as not occurs in close conjunction with eating, and they therefore are likely to share extensive areas of common meanings. However, the fact that there are social situations in which eating and drinking are assigned to meaningfully different 'channels' or 'tracks' (see Chapter 6 for an example), and that there are events where drinking figures exclusively or predominantly, indicates that we should at least explore the possibility that there is some generic potential for difference between the two.

First of all, temporally, the physiological effects of drinking many liquids, unlike foods, are registered within the event of consumption itself: one becomes drunk from drinking too many martinis, or jittery from drinking too much coffee, within the space of a few hours, while one only becomes fat from eating too much food over the course of weeks or months. Drinking is thus susceptible to indexing minor changes within a social situation, while the semiotics of eating tends to index more durable forms of social relation (I thank Matthew Hull for this observation): speech events involving the consumption of alcohol drinks, for example, will often be implicitly or explicitly structured around the general progress of inebriation (a point made long ago by Charles Frake 1964, see Chapter 6).

Drinks provide different 'alibis' for sociable interaction than food does (I borrow the idea of drinks as an 'alibi' for sociability from Eric Laurier (2008)). As Gaudio notes (2003: 659–60), in the 1997 movie *Good Will Hunting* the working-class hero Will displays his unpretentious brilliance by responding to an invitation to 'go out for coffee' with a counter-invitation to 'eat a bunch of caramels', his iconoclastic point being that the linkage of drinking (coffee) with sociability is an arbitrary convention, one might just as well eat caramels and talk. Will provides us with a strongly cultural constructivist critique of the role of materiality in meaning: coffee and caramels are just equally effective material pegs on which to hang socially constructed meanings or commensal occasion for talk. If one finds this radically reductionist argument unconvincing, one is forced to admit that there is something specific about the materiality of drink that makes it a particularly good accompaniment for talk. Without intending to veer into biological or physiological determinism as a corrective for the excesses of cultural constructivism, nevertheless perhaps there are ways that drink potentially *affords* different kinds of sociability than eating. Perhaps it is because social drinking is not as strongly occasioned by physiological thirst as eating is, or perhaps drinking coffee or alcohol does not fulfil any perceived physiological need, allowing it to enact more elective and egalitarian relations than food, which is perhaps more susceptible to sustaining hierarchical relationships, for example, allowing the host to 'encompass' the guest by fulfilling a basic physiological need. Perhaps, too, it is simply because one can always have another drink, regardless of whether one is thirsty or not, allowing it to be a more flexible alibi for off-the-cuff sociability, while there is some number of times a day in which eating yet another full meal begins to approach physical impossibility.

Thirdly, while the Renaissance humanists discussed by Jeanneret's fascinating study draw strong linkages between convivial conversation and convivial eating, table talk and table manners, the classical Greek authors they looked to as a model seemingly opposed speaking and eating as absolute opposites, aligning drinking with speaking and eating with silence. The classical Greek symposium is divided into two parts. In the first part, the guests 'eat in silence', and only when the food is cleared away

does the convivial drinking and talking, 'sympotic wine and poetic word' begin (Jeanneret 1991: 144, 149). The same equation of eating and silence is common in parts of the contemporary Middle East like Yemen, and other non-alcoholic non-food substances like tea, incensed water, smoking the shisha (water pipe) or chewable qat leaves serve as the infrastructure for sociable interaction (Meneley forthcoming). As we will see, there are numerous examples below where the 'pairing' of word and drink is stronger and more intimate than the pairing of word and food, from sociable events as different as cocktail parties or ancient Greek symposiums.

Since this book is largely about the materiality and meaning of drinks, drinks as things and drinks as signs, I should first clarify what a sign is, and what the relationship of 'signs' to 'things' is.

Ordering things and ordered by things

Drinks, as a phenomenon of material culture, are both ordered by people into cultural systems ('ordering things') and reciprocally act indexically to order people into those systems ('ordered by things') (Miller 2002). First, ordering things. We might approach drinks in a vaguely Saussurean or structuralist manner, as a series of things that are ordered according to a culturally constructed (and therefore conventional or arbitrary) system of classification or *code* (Saussurean *langue*). When viewed as part of a code, an object is not viewed semiotically in terms of its material qualities but rather in terms of its place within a system of structured oppositions and equivalences, giving it a differential purely negative *value* to which a positive meaning (sense) is arbitrarily assigned. In the extreme formulation of Saussure, who took his basic model of sign to be linguistic sign, the materiality of the sign does not matter except to establish relations of contrast and identity (value) to which arbitrary meanings are then assigned (see, for example, Holdcroft 1991: chapter 6, Chandler 1994).

The purely negative notion of differential value draws attention to the way that the meaning of things is always dependent on the *other* things with which it is compared and contrasted within a larger system: 'One's sense of any given thing is one in which other things are always implicated' (Miller 2002: 404). To take a simple example, one cannot determine the meaning of a single cocktail, say, a martini, without ascertaining its differential value by locating it within a larger ordering of drinks in general, alcoholic drinks, and especially a semantic field of oppositions between mixed drinks called 'cocktails'. Within this latter system, martinis have a set of arbitrary distinctive properties that link them to certain other drinks (say, both other mixed drinks like Gimlets, Rob Roys, and other classic cocktail drinks, but also straight shots of any spirit) but oppose them to another class of drinks, for example, those that are informally called 'girl drinks' (including, for

example, drinks such as Pink Lady, Sex on the Beach). The former class has all the classic semiotic properties of a residual ‘unmarked’ term in contrast to a specifically and differentially ‘marked’ term: for one, the former class does not really have a name, and contains pretty much anything that is not specifically included in the latter class, and not all of them share the same properties that oppose them to girls drinks. We can call them ‘boy drinks’ only to emphasize that they are united by their contrast with ‘girl drinks’, but no one ever calls them that. They are just unmarked ‘drinks’, they only take on oppositive values as ‘boy drinks’ if they are somehow opposed to those drinks that are permanently and unavoidably marked as ‘girl drinks’. Using a classic structuralist mode of analysis, the different distinctive material properties of each group are ordered into a series of parallel binary contrasts roughly like so:

‘Girl drink’ (marked)	‘Boy drink’ (unmarked)
Sweet	Not sweet (even bad tasting)
Bright colours	Dark colours or no colour
Decorative presentation (umbrellas!)	Utilitarian presentation
Funny or provocative name	Descriptive name
Mixed	Unmixed

The central perception that the material properties of things are being ordered according to the social properties of drinkers (gender) is a point that most drinkers will recognize. In an attenuated way, the existence of the opposition in drinks points to a general drinking culture in which the two genders drink together but semiotically enact their gender difference and transform this gender difference into a (specifically heterosexual) sexualized complementarity by projecting these oppositions onto distinct classes of drinks. Moreover, the principles of classification here are quite general: the features that define a drink as a girl drink are found in the gendering of a whole range of objects (Churchill 2010). And yet, like any general classificatory project, certain things or properties of things complicate or fall out of the classification entirely, our projects of ordering things are always confronted with objects whose properties complicate or escape this ordering: A Manhattan is sweet and colourful, is it a girl drink? Almost all classic ‘Tiki drinks’ (Dr Funk of Tahiti, Arawak, Honi Honi, Zombie) and many ‘highballs’ (Gin and Tonic, Screwdriver, Singapore Sling) have many of the properties of girl drinks, but it is debatable whether anyone regards them as being specifically girl drinks.

If we order things, we are also ordered by things. The very ubiquity of the materialization of the ordering system can also produce powerful ordering effects. If artefacts evoke a classificatory principle (result of ordering things) or social distinctions, Miller argues,

> to be brought up in such an environment in which the properties of all things declare the ubiquity of a particular ordering principle, will result in a perception of the world which takes this ordering principle as second nature, close to the concept of habit, an order accepted without any conscious thought or consideration as to the way things might otherwise be. (2002: 403)

Thus, a lot of the 'social' is actually located in, delegated to, non-human actors (Latour 1992): the bulk of the cultural classification of 'gender' is done to, and done by, non-humans, and one might even go so far as to say that in our material culture, gender is first and foremost encountered as a property of things and not people (Churchill 2010).

Some of this ordering by things happens in the aggregate, as the very ubiquity of the materialization of classificatory projects works to naturalize the classificatory code. However, in the case of embodied material culture, much of this 'being ordered by things' happens on an indexical level (the token-level relation between a specific drink and a specific drinker). Once we have ordered things into a system of classification, they will in turn order us indexically: in the case of drinks, this will largely happen when we order them and drink them. The alcoholic (material) aspect of the drink will make you drunk, but the semiotic aspect of the drink you choose will determine whether you are a simple drunk or a 'girl drink drunk'.

Signs and other things

In much of the book, then, I will use a Peircean, rather than Saussurean, theory of signs for the basis of an account that is better able to deal with the materiality of the sign. The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce defines 'A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity' (1931–58: 2.228).

A sign is something

The first thing we notice is that a sign for Peirce (unlike, for example, Saussure) *is something*. That is, it is a thing, in the broadest possible sense; it has a material form as a *sign vehicle* (or *representamen*). Since Peirce arranges all his definitions into triads, there are three basic kinds of sign vehicles. First, drinks, as material objects, embody potentially meaningful

qualities (*qualisigns*) in excess of those required by whatever semiotic labour they perform. These qualisigns are potentialities (hence they are also called occasionally 'potisigns'); to become actually meaningful and effective, they must be embodied in an individual sign vehicle (*sinsign*), they must be part of something material, real or actual (hence sinsigns are also called 'actisigns'): every individual drink and act of drinking is a *sinsign*. Lastly, since drinks are often the subject of conventional systems of classification as we have already seen, any individual *sinsign* (individual drink like 'a martini'), may be a *token*-level instantiation of a conventional category (a *legisign*, or type, such as 'martini').

So, taking this simple example, the qualisigns that are conventionally relevant to an ordinary mixed drink like a martini include, for example, that it is composed of at least gin or vodka and dry vermouth, that the resultant drink is served cold, that it exhibits features like clarity, purity, and an elusive and variable property called 'dryness'. It will have other variable material properties too (e.g. how 'dry' it is, whether it is 'dirty', or served with olive or lemon peel), but these are not relevant to its conventional definition as a martini. Any single martini will exhibit, then, a set of qualisigns (most of which are material properties that are defined as qualisigns by some sort of cultural system) which remain mere abstractions until they are *embodied* in a single instance of a martini (a sinsign). The type (legisign), martini, is defined by these features, and any token of the type has to have this set of qualisigns in order to count as a token of the type (sinsign). However, any individual dry martini is made by a slightly different recipe or different conditions, so while the 'digital' (either/or) definition of the 'dry' martini as a type (legisign) doesn't care how much vermouth there is, any individual 'dry' martini (sinsign) will vary considerably in 'analogue' (more/less) terms in terms of just exactly *how dry* it is (see Chandler 1994 for some of these distinctions).

A sign stands to someone

Secondly, a sign stands to someone, signs are signs because they address someone. Drinks stand 'to someone' in a very specific way. Drinks are material objects and they are signs, and their status as a sign depends on their status as a material object, and this depends on how they stand *to someone*, in the first instance, they stand to someone as a drink to be drunk. So, going back to cocktails in general, one property these all have is that they have additional meanings that can only be recovered when you consider their 'sinsign' (token) relationship to the drinker: if you drink a lot of either of them, you will suffer delusions of wit and charm, get drunk, fall down, puke, get the spins, and mercifully black out. This is a *causal* (indexical) effect they have as things on human bodies (*embodied* material culture).

So one property that cocktails share are the causal ones that anyone who drinks enough of them will become familiar with. But there are also aspects of their materiality that are only salient to some drinkers, and being sensitive or insensitive to such properties marks the difference between a connoisseur and an average drunk. For example, a badly mixed martini is still a martini for the latter, in that it gets the job done. But a martini connoisseur will find the exact balance of qualities, as well as the presence of undesirable qualities, as a foundation for pronouncing some martinis closer to the prototypical martini than others, and incidentally establish themselves as the kind of person who can make authoritative pronouncements on this topic. Many martini connoisseurs will also cavil about whether a vodka martini is a martini at all (thereby at least establishing the gin martini as the prototype of the class and consigning the consumption of vodka martinis to those who like the taste of vermouth (Matus 2011)). There is, of course, plenty of room for argument between these two positions about the proper function of, and therefore correct basis for appreciation of, the martini: if the connoisseur thinks the drunk next to him ordering an improperly mixed martini is a yob, the drunk is just as likely to think that connoisseurship of weaponized alcohol-delivery devices like the martini is pompous and basically missing the point anyway. As Kingsley Amis notes, 'the world of booze is rent by little controversies that are never settled' (2008: 193), and these controversies over booze give us excellent insights into the semiotic life of drinks and drinking.

So the system of classification as either/or type (legisign) still allows a fade-out of token-level instances of the type from 'more' to 'less', 'better' to worse' which provide the stuff of argument. In addition, not only are some of the tokens of the type stratified into 'better' or 'worse' examples, there exists for each classificatory system (type) whose tokens are stratified into 'better or worse' examples a set of (self-appointed or institutionally appointed) experts, whose job, roughly speaking, is to authoritatively *verbally* regulate the referential extension of the type classification to the token-level instances. Both these systems of expertise are enacted in the form of 'trials', a term I will use roughly in the sense of Latour (1999: 122–4, 311, see also Callon et al. 2002: 198 on 'qualification trials'), whether these performances take the form of laboratory tests or organoleptic tests such as wine-tastings, or even ordering a drink or getting drunk, and part of what these trials do is classify or qualify specific actors (including humans and non-humans) in terms of these typifications. So acts of reference, among other things, always have something of the form of trial inasmuch as reference involves 'qualification', extending type-level categories to token-level entities by describing or characterizing them.

But in these different kinds of 'trials', the way the connoisseur's expertise is constructed differs from the way a scientist's expertise is constructed (see Silverstein 2003, 2006). As Hilary Putnam, in a famous article, *The Meaning of Meaning* (1975), shows, certain terms for naturally existing types ('natural

kind terms', the examples he uses are 'elm' and 'gold') are used in everyday reference to objects by people who actually have no idea how to securely identify whether the individual object being referred to *really is* a token of the type. I, for example, spoke of 'pines' and 'firs' for many years without the foggiest idea which of the needle-bearing trees was which. Such terms, Putnam argues, involve a *linguistic division of labour*, or, as Silverstein (2006: 488) puts it 'a sociolinguistic division of denotational labor', in that some speakers (let's call them 'natural scientists') are invested with the authority to make authoritative pronouncements about which individuals are tokens of which type (we are talking about naturally occurring types like *elm* or *gold*). Such denotational terms, then, are socially *stratified*, or unevenly distributed in society, in that there are speakers who can extend them in reference to objects authoritatively, and other speakers whose use of those terms is parasitic on the authority of these other speakers. In the case of natural kind terms, these are *either/or* and not *more/less* identifications, an object either is, or is not, an elm, or gold.

The social stratification of terms used by connoisseurs in organoleptic trials (e.g. wine-tasting (Silverstein 2003, 2006), olive-oil tasting (Meneley 2007)) differs from the paradigmatic model of laboratory trials (e.g. Latour 1999: 122–4) in that it may involve 'scientific' either/or identifications (using standardized professional terminologies broadly parasitic on 'scientific' paradigms of reference), but it seems to have a lot of analogue 'more or less' qualities, as well as qualities expressed in 'stylistic, colorful, non-terminologized descriptors' (Silverstein 2003: 224). As Silverstein argues, while some aspects of events of connoisseurship do mimic the paradigmatic 'scientific' model of standardized terminologies reminiscent of natural kinds, they also involve an almost *eucharistic* reflexive moment in which the ability to recognize and deploy 'socially stratified' denotational terms to the wine iconically indexes a similar degree of social 'distinction' in the speaker: 'As we consume the wine and properly (ritually) denote that consumption, we become, in performative realtime, [a correspondingly] well-bred, characterologically interesting (subtle, balanced, intriguing, winning, etc.) person' (Silverstein 2003: 226). In other words, while the laboratory trial is primarily about defining the properties of the object, the organoleptic trial defines *both* the prestigious properties of the wine and the connoisseur at the same time (see Chapters 4–5).

Just as we order things into cultural systems of types ('martinis', 'girls drinks'), these cultural typifications order us in turn by association (we move from 'ordering things' to 'being ordered by things'). Operating in the 'scientific' mode, the connoisseur is simply 'ordering things', putting the properties of the prestige commodity to trial. Operating in the 'eucharistic' mode, the connoisseur is undergoing trial themselves, 'being ordered by things', indexing their own ability to recognize and denote the prestige-conferring properties of the prestige commodity and so gain 'distinction' from the organoleptic encounter. The expertise of the connoisseur is thus,

in Silverstein's analysis, a curious but revealing hybrid of these two different kinds of 'trial'. But much more prosaically, the same principle of 'ordering things' and 'being ordered by things' can be found, first and foremost, in the very act of 'ordering a drink' (as we will see in Chapter 2). In some places, to order a 'martini on the rocks' is to exhibit a certain lack of knowledge of what a martini is, but for a man to order a 'girl drink' is not only to exhibit a lack of knowledge of what a girl drink is or even to invite imputations of gender confusion or even gender dysphoria.

In some respect or capacity

The other important part of the Peircean definition of the sign is the relation or 'ground' between the sign vehicle and the object, the way that the sign stands for something to someone *in some respect or capacity*. These Peircean semiotic terms for different kinds of constitutive relation between sign and object ('ground') I define as follows (broadly following Peircean definitions found in Chandler 1994):

Icon: A sign that stands for its object by virtue of similarity or resemblance, for example, any mimetic image, a pencil drawing or painting of a tree in relation to the tree itself.

Index: A sign that stands for its object by existential or physical connection or contiguity, for example, a weathercock pointing in the direction of the prevailing wind, or the way physical evidence at a crime scene (a bullet hole, blood on the floor) points to the commission of the crime (the bullet that made the hole, the wound that produced the blood).

Symbol: A sign that stands for its object by convention alone, for example, the conventional signs of a language, which must be memorized by rote.

Note that any single sign may partake of different grounds: a footprint in the sand is both an icon and index of the foot that made it; a photograph similarly is an index (since it is produced by a chemical reaction in the film made by light coming from the object photographed) but also an icon (because it resembles the object); a map is a simplified icon of the territory it represents (the distances between points on a scale map resemble the relative distances between equivalent points in the territory), but also consists of conventional symbols (which are decoded by the legend on the map). Lastly, to be usable (and not a map of an imaginary territory like a map of Middle Earth), there has to be a way to mediate indexically between the map and the territory it represents: there must be landmarks to find where one is in terms of the map, or on a fixed map like the map of a university campus, a 'you are here' which serves as an index.

Ordering principles: Semiotic ideologies and social ontologies

This brings me to the next point, the potential (indexical or iconic) meanings of drinks (whether they are regarded as being purely material quenching of the thirst or being conventionally symbolic of, say, something about the drinker or the event of drinking) remain just that, potentials, until they are (conventionally) construed in some way. Indexes and icons 'assert nothing', they depend on the 'semiotic ideologies' which construe them, and these ideologies in turn depend on broader basic assumptions about what exists in the world (ontologies) (Keane 2003: 409, see also Parmentier 1994: 142, 154). As Webb Keane defines this term:

> By semiotic ideology I mean basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world. It determines, for instance, what people will consider the role that intentions play in signification to be, what kinds of possible agent (humans only? Animals? Spirits?) exist to which acts of signification might be imputed, whether signs are arbitrary or necessarily linked to their objects, and so forth. (2003: 419)

Depending on how they are construed, the kinds of qualities of an object (qualisigns) can afford different semiotic potentialities, allowing objects of different kinds to be synthesized and become parts of different complex networks of meaning. Like any other material object, any sign vehicle 'bundles' together different sensuous qualities and properties (Keane 2003: 414), some of which are symbolically relevant, others not, for any given interpretation. I note here that by recognizing the need for a construing cultural order of shared representations and practices, semiotic ideologies and social ontologies, this book differs from the otherwise very comparable 'materialist' semiotics developed within the field of Science and Technology Studies (particularly the work of Bruno Latour and John Law). Since I have borrowed heavily from their work here and there, I should recognize that the need for a construing conventional order of Peircean 'thirdness' (culture, semiotic ideologies, social ontology) to supplement the emergent 'mess' of the world of Peircean 'secondness' means that my invocation of specific terms from this field will always have a compromise 'hybrid' quality (I thank Paul Kockelman for reminding me to make this caveat).

Qualisigns and affordances: The voices of things

The term qualisign will be important in what follows, and it is important that it has two rather different uses. As originally used by Peirce, a qualisign

refers to any quality (*quali-)* of an object that affords a *potential* for it to act as a sign (*-sign*). Thus, he also uses the term *potisign* to emphasize its status as a pure potentiality for signification (I thank Nick Harkness for reminding me of this Peircean term). Thus, depending on whether this potentiality is actualized by being conventionally recognized, the term can refer both to the 'semiotic' and 'material' properties of the sign. In fact, Peirce defines the 'material' properties of the sign as being simply the inevitable surplus of potentials (qualisigns) that are not currently meaningful. As Peirce put it, 'since a sign is not identical with the thing signified, but differs from the latter in some respects, it must plainly have some characters which belong to it in itself. . . . These I call the *material* qualities of the sign' (1868). The example Peirce gives is the word 'man' written in different media: from 'semiotic' perspective, insofar as we are interested only in the capacity of these different written forms to convey the word 'man', it hardly matters whether the word is written with ink on paper, chalk on a slate, a marking pen on a wall, or scrawled with a knife in a desk. But from the perspective of a janitor trying to clean up a classroom, or an administrator trying to determine whether the inscription counts as proper use of the classroom or vandalism, the differences in the material realizations of the sign make a good deal of difference, and these various 'material' differences can take on a material and semiotic life of their own subsequently.

The term qualisign, however, is strongly suggestive of 'meaningful qualities' of a sign (i.e. those potential qualisigns that have been invested with conventional meanings). Nancy Munn (1986) has influentially and effectively used the term to organize the qualities that organize Gawan Kula exchange to mean, as Webb Keane paraphrases her definition, 'certain sensuous qualities of objects that have a privileged role within a larger system of value' (2003: 414). By focusing on this particular reading of the term qualisign (qualisigns that have been conventionalized within a cultural system), Munn finds identities between very different modes of qualities like 'lightness' across different material manifestations (bodies, canoes) without simply reducing these material identities to a purely cultural construction:

> One of Munn's key ethnographic insights was that a culturally meaningful quality such as 'buoyancy' or 'lightness' . . . could be experienced via any number of objects of sensory experience, e.g., the wetness and expansiveness of the sea, the slipperiness of fish, the fluttering motion of birds, the lightness of the heated and dried wood of a canoe, or the quickness of a brilliantly-adorned dancing body. (Harkness forthcoming)

The two conceptions of qualisigns afford us different avenues for interrogating the materiality of signs. Munn's conception of qualisign allows us to synthesize different qualities materially manifested in fairly different ways but construed as 'the same' or at least comparable within a

cultural system: they allow us to give a cultural account of *iconicity* that is at the same time attendant to materiality. Qualisigns in the Peircean sense are also important for the study of materiality of signs because they point to what Keane calls 'bundling': qualisigns (like 'redness', Peirce's favourite example), after all, are only potentials; they must be materially embodied in particular objects.

> But as soon as they do, they are actually, and often contingently (rather than by logical necessity), bound up with other qualities – redness in an apple comes along with spherical shape, light weight, and so forth. In practice, there is no way entirely to eliminate that factor of co-presence or what we might call 'bundling. This points to one of the obvious, but important, effects of materiality: redness cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which can become contingent but real factors in its social life. (Keane 2003: 414)

The bundled 'material' aspects of a sign not only afford the potential for semiotic 're-readings' and revalorization of the sign, but also afford the possibility of a whole series of 'nonsemiotic events and happenings' that form the material biography of the thing as a thing, and not as a sign (Hull 2012: 29), including all the contingencies and causalities they are subject to as things and not as signs (Keane 2003).

In this last sense, the term qualisign refers to properties of an object that are similar to what are usually called 'affordances' in Science and Technology Studies, offering a way that the materiality of an object can play a role without resorting either to reductive positions of determinism (in which the material properties of the object determine its functions) nor constructivism (in which the qualities of the object are entirely the product of a construing discourse). Building on the work of Gibson (1979), Hutchby defines affordances generally as the multiple functional and relational possibilities (realized or unrealized) that a material object offers for action (Hutchby 2001a: 26). According to this view,

> [A]ffordances are not just functional but also relational aspects of an object's material presence in the world. Affordances are *functional* in the sense that they are enabling, as well as constraining, factors in a given organism's attempt to engage in some activity: for instance, walking, or hiding, photocopying a document, and so on. Certain objects, environments or artefacts have affordances which enable the particular activity while others do not. But at the same time the affordances can shape the conditions of possibility associated with an action: it may be possible to do it one way, but not another. The *relational* aspect, by contrast, draws our attention to the way that the affordances of an object may be different for one species than for another. (Hutchby 2001b: 448)

The two concepts are doppelgangers inhabiting opposed sides of the semiotic/technical or sociotechnical divide: One might say, therefore, that qualisigns are the semiotic affordances of a thing. In general, we might attempt to overcome the opposition between the social/semiotic aspects of the sign and the technical/material aspects of the thing, bringing them together under a single rubric, similar to what Munn (1977) calls 'fabrication', including both notionally 'symbolic' and 'technical' interventions transformative of qualisigns ('socially significant properties') or affordances ('operational capacities of objects'), respectively, as well as all the transformations of either sort in the entire circulatory career of the object including production, exchange and consumption:

> This view of fabrication sets the stage for a study of making processes not simply as, for instance, technological construction, but rather as developing symbolic processes that transform both socially significant properties or operational capacities of objects, and significant aspects of the relations between persons and objects, between the human and the material worlds. Fabrication, seen in this way, does not end with technological construction, but consists of the total cycle of conversions effecting significant changes in the object. (Munn 1977: 39)

Drinks and drunks

In the literature on drinking, this dualistic opposition between the 'social/semiotic' and the 'technical/material' takes on a specific form, especially when we are talking about alcoholic drinks, namely, the opposition between 'social' drinking as Durkheimian ritual expression of community and 'antisocial' drinking as purely material social pathology (Douglas 1987). One important sensuous property of the drinks considered in this book is that some of them are alcoholic, others are not. Whether this is treated as a material or semiotic property of drinks has led to a rather unproductive division within the literature on drinking across the social sciences, one which reflects all the inherited naturalistic dualisms between meaning and materiality, cultural constructivism and technical determinism. The bulk of the drinking literature is determinist: it seizes on this one property of drink (alcohol content) which is given only causal (indexical) significance (Drink → Drank → Drunk), then proceeds to link it instantly with excessive and pathological forms of consumption (Drink → Drunks). Thus the only question that can be asked about alcoholic beverages (drinks) are the social pathologies they may create physiologically (drunks) (Douglas 1987: 4–6).

Of course, the alternate position is ultimately no more satisfying, which is, in effect, to take a strongly dematerialized cultural constructivist stance towards the problem, ignoring alcohol content and associated

pathologies, focusing only on moderate drinking and situations where drinking is embedded in ritual events expressive of Durkheimian collective effervescence, so that you might easily forget that vodka has a higher alcohol content than beer, or soft drinks for that matter. In the limiting case, whole analyses of the social or cultural significance of coffee houses or cocktail parties are carried out without a single cup of coffee or cocktail figuring into the account (Douglas 1987: 6). Such dematerialized accounts are no more satisfying than a structuralist account of, say, the somewhat brazen semiotics of 'girl drinks' which forgets that those drinks are so concocted not only for their semiotic form but also for their considerable alcoholic content, or that they work indexically not only to reclassify the drinker as a 'girl' (part of the cultural 'code'), but they also get that drinker drunk (materially: the sweetness masks the flavour of the alcohol, for one thing).

Drinks' relation to talk: Topical and infrastructural drinking

How to bridge this dualism? One place to look to bring drinks back into events of speaking is to explore what kinds of calibrations exist between the obviously semiotic order of speaking and the material order of drinks (see Frake 1964 for a classic early discussion of the calibration of the material order of drinking and the verbal order of speech genres). The opposed functions of the mouth (speaking and drinking) are physiologically consigned to be non-coincident, but in larger events of convivial consumption, such as saying and drinking a toast, they are brought into close alignment. So, drinking derives part of its semiotic power by being aligned with, or contrasted with, the more obviously semiotic function of speech. When drinking is embedded in a ritual action, a performative utterance such as a toast (Austinian performance utterances are those which 'do' something, which performs some significant social action, have a consequential conventional indexical effect on their social context, think of 'I now pronounce you man and wife' at a wedding ceremony (Austin 1962)), drinking a toast is foregrounded as being in itself a performative act as important as speaking the toast. One might even say that the drinking is the actual performative moment of the toast. I'll call this form of drinking which is explicitly commented upon or regimented by accompanying talk 'topical drinking'.

But if in 'topical drinking' the drink belongs to the foregrounded 'message', in other events of speaking and drinking it has other roles to play as part of the backgrounded channel or infrastructure of communication. We move from drinking as topic for talk to drinking as infrastructure for talk. This is particularly the case in those forms of sociable communication, what Jakobson, following Malinowski, labelled 'phatic communion', communication which foregrounds the channel of communication (Elyachar

2010). Julia Elyachar has recently provocatively claimed that sociable talk of this sort, talk that builds, maintains and preserves infrastructural channels of communication, amounts to a kind of 'phatic labor' which 'creates a social infrastructure of communicative channels that are as essential to economy as roads, bridges, or telephone lines' (2010: 452). But if sociable talk, 'phatic labor', works to create seen-but-unnoticed infrastructural channels of communication, it is often the case that drinks, drinking and places for drinking produce the material infrastructures for sociable talk, what Ellis calls 'architectures of sociability' (2008: 161). Elyachar describes, for example, the 'Grand Central Coffeehouse' of Cairo as a central 'communicative hub' of this infrastructure of sociability:

> The coffeehouse is a beehive of sociality, where men from workshops chat and gossip over instruments of conviviality such as coffee, tea, and water pipes *(shisha)* . . . . In popular communities of Cairo, the coffeehouse is a place where practices of sociality integral to male productive work are prominently on display. It is a communicative hub of phatic labor. (2010: 454)

When it is embedded as part of a ritual act like a toast that draws attention to, verbally foregrounds and regiments the meaning of the drink, then drinking is 'topical' and obviously 'semiotic'. When it is sunk into the semiotic substrates of communicative infrastructures, then drinking takes on all the defining properties of such infrastructures, becoming invisible, presupposed, backgrounded (Star 1999: 380). Thus, for all the social and historical importance conferred indirectly on places of drinking like cafes in contemporary social theory (Chapter 2), one hardly ever hears a word about the drinks or the drinking that define these events or places: cocktail parties are described without drinks *or* drunks, cafes are described without a single item on the menu:

> At the heart of the café is the activity which is often remarked on and then quickly passed over in favour of something more apparently profound, the drinking of drinks. Drinking, be it of beer or coffee or milk, keeps our mouths occupied during all manner of sociable occasions where those mouths are also and otherwise engaged in talking. Drinking serves as an alibi for conviviality, we are at the café to drink coffee and not to hang around with other people for the pleasure of hanging around with other people. (Laurier 2008: 171)

While social theorists of the café like Jurgen Habermas (1992) or Ray Olderberg (1989) seek to find something more important therein, like how the café serves as a laboratory for the creation of new modern forms of public association and circulation of texts (see, for example, Laurier and Philo 2007), they miss the point of the powerful role that drinks and drinking

play in producing the conditions of possibility for these to exist. As Laurier points out in his sensitive and nuanced analysis, 'what might be distinctive about going for a coffee in the café is that it might be an occasion without "a" reason, thus, unlike the telephone call with its ever-present "reason for calling"', the convivial drinking of coffee (the official purpose) gives an alibi, an enabling infrastructural condition, for unmotivated sociable talk (2008: 178–9). But as Laurier also shows, drinking serves as more than an alibi, it serves as an infrastructure regulating the channel throughout, serving as a resource for both easing the conversation along, but emptying the glass also provides a resource for ending the conversation:

> [T]he very fact of drinking, rather than what substance people are drinking, eases the conversation along. In particular here we have seen how the last sips are involved in the last remarks on a conversation on a particular topic. (2008: 178)

Drinking elsewheres: Cultures of circulation

The semiotics of drink are not only limited to face-to-face events of commensal consumption and face-to-face talk; however, drinks create worlds in both acts of consumption and in their circulation as well. Drinks are, as Foster puts it, 'worldly things': worldly because they are both physically present here and now and yet 'bear traces of their simultaneous existence elsewhere, over and beyond one's immediate horizons' (2008a: xvii).

Drinks, worldly things, produce worlds. As Mary Douglas reminds us in her discussion of 'constructive drinking', drinks and drinking are not only deployed *representationally* in ritual events to produce idealized models of the social world ('ceremonials of drinking construct an ideal world' (1979: 8, 11–12)), but they are also part of that world: '[D]rinks are in the world. They are not a commentary on it' (1979: 9). Since drinks are *in the world*, drinks actually traverse the world as circulatory objects, indexing the dimensions, contours and horizons of their imagined circulatory worlds, and reflecting the dimensions of their circulation in their own material and semiotic properties (Munn 1977, 1986, Law and Hetherington 1999, Lee and LiPuma 2002). Looking at drinks as constitutive elements of 'cultures of circulation', which are 'created and animated by the cultural forms that circulate through them' (Lee and LiPuma 2002: 192), provides a different window on how drinks, worldly things, are both *in the world* and *create worlds* by their actual circulation. I note that while the two groups of authors I have cited here (include both anthropologists working on 'cultures of circulation' (Munn, Lee and LiPuma) and scholars within Actor-Network-Theory (Law and Hetherington)) have strikingly similar views about how the actual circulation of objects *creates* the spaces and times in which they circulate, they differ in one important respect: those

who work with a model of ‘cultures of circulation’ or ‘social imaginaries’ deal not only with the material circulation of objects (sinsign level, Peircean secondness), but they also supplement it with a collective imaginary act (legisign level, Peircean thirdness, shared representations and practices including semiotic ideologies and social ontologies) which regiments or organizes this circulation (hence the circulatory objects are also ‘cultural forms’). As Lee and LiPuma (2002: 192) put it: ‘The circulation of such forms always presupposes the existence of their respective interpretive communities, with their own forms of interpretation and evaluation.’

The circulation of drinks creates worlds; it also divides those worlds. Circulation is similar to the term ‘communication’ as discussed by John Peters in his book *Speaking into the Air* (1999), in that it is inherently dualistic: circulation, like communication, is both a bridge and a chasm. Peters argues that the idea of communication ‘simultaneously call[s] up the dream of instantaneous access and the nightmare of the labyrinth of solitude’ (1999: 5). If Peters shows the mediated nature of communication produces both fantasies of immediacy and fears of hypermediation, the same is true for circulation. Circulation spatio-temporally divides the immediacy of a ‘natural economy’, where producers are either immediate consumers, or at least know them as consociates, into a mediated world in which producers and consumers are anonymous contemporaries who can only infer each others’ existence indirectly through media such as commodities. The troubling division of the idyllic unity of the natural economy into a postlapsarian opposition between separate spheres of production and consumption leads to fantasies of reconnecting producers and consumers in an unmediated fashion: farmer’s markets, the slow food movement, the farm to fork movement, to name a few such recent responses (see Meneley 2004, Paxson 2010, Weiss 2011 and references there). But as for communication, so with circulation, the idea of either of these as a face-to-face ‘person-to-person activity became thinkable only in the shadow of mediated [long-distance] communication’ (Peters 1999: 6). The fantasy of meeting the producer face to face, we might say, can only be thinkable in the shadow of industrial commodity production and long-distance exchange. As a result of this duality, circulation can both create worlds (circulation as bridge: immediacy) and also divide worlds (circulation as chasm: hypermediation), depending on how the circulatory medium is foregrounded or backgrounded (see Chapters 5, 8).

Consider, for a moment, the object lesson of gin (the topic of Chapter 3). First, consumption: drinking gin and tonics across the British empire was surely an archetypal ritual of imperial elites on the verandas of colonial clubhouses and bungalows across the British empire, expressive both of the solidarity of these exiled elites against the natives who served them their cocktails and also their pervasive fear of malaria in the tropics. The British colonials drinking gin in the clubhouse, worrying about the supply of ice, longing to be back in Picadilly, and heatedly discussing the possible